

DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 218 567

CG 016 067

AUTHOR Clees, W. James; Shelton, J. Ken
TITLE Survival Skills for the Aged and Their Families: A Counselor Model.
PUB DATE 17 Mar 82
NOTE 10p.; Paper presented at the Annual Convention of the American Personnel and Guidance Association (Detroit, MI, March 17-20, 1982).
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Age Discrimination; *Aging (Individuals); *Counseling Techniques; Counselor Role; *Family Counseling; *Family Problems; Interpersonal Relationship; *Intervention; Models; *Older Adults; Parent Child Relationship

ABSTRACT

This paper examines some problems of aging individuals and of the families of the aged and suggests ways in which the family counselor can facilitate the adjustment of both to the aging process. The causes of an increased aged population are presented in an introductory section. Problems associated with aging such as physical changes and the emotional and psychological demands that accompany the five major losses, i.e., home, health, finances, friends and loved ones, and life, which an older person sustains are explored. Problems facing the family with elderly members including those related to economics, housing, health, mobility, and parent abuse are detailed. Six specific suggestions for the counseling interview with an aged person are given as well as a summary of the counselor's role with the aged and families of the elderly. A reference list is also included. (MCF)

 * Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
 * from the original document. *

ED218567

SURVIVAL SKILLS FOR THE AGED AND THEIR FAMILIES:

A COUNSELOR MODEL

by

W. James Clees, Ed.D.
Associate Professor
The Citadel
Charleston, South Carolina

and

J. Ken Shelton, Ed.D.
Associate Professor
The Citadel
Charleston, South Carolina

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION
CENTER (ERIC)
☒ This document has been reproduced as
received from the person or organization
originating it.
☐ Minor changes have been made to improve
reproduction quality.
• Points of view or opinions stated in this docu-
ment do not necessarily represent official NIE
position or policy.

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS
MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

W. James Clees
J. Ken Shelton

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES
INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

Paper Presented
at

American Personnel and Guidance Association
National Convention

Detroit, Michigan

March 17, 1982

CE 016067

SURVIVAL SKILLS FOR THE AGED AND THEIR FAMILIES: A COUNSELOR MODEL

Introduction

According to Hrobak (1981), aging is commonly called "the graying of America." The birth rate is declining while life expectancy escalates, resulting in the oldest society America has ever known. The average child born in 1977 could expect to live 73 years which is 26 years longer than a child born in 1900.

Hrobak (1981) goes on to say that Americans 65 and older made up 11 percent of the population in 1978, or 24 million people which is more than double the 4.1 percent in 1900. This number is projected to be 12.2 percent by 2000 and 18.3 percent by 2030.

Herbert and Binsberg (1979) explain that the United States has not substantially increased the longevity of life, that is the number of years one can expect to live. What has increased is the total number of people who will live longer. An example would be: a person born between 1929-1931, who reaches the age of 65, can expect to live to age 77 or 12 more years; whereas, a person born in 1971, who reaches the age of 65, can expect to live to age 80 or 15 more years. So in a span of 40 years, 1931-1971, society has increased the longevity of life only 3 years.

Some of the reasons for the increase in the number of elderly today is due to lower infant mortality rate, fewer child deaths due to disease, fewer young adult deaths due to young adult diseases, and a "new" field of medicine called "geriatrics." So during the 20th century life longevity has increased by 3 years and the life expectancy by 24 years. One additional variable which hasn't been around long is the physical fitness craze in America today. This, if it continues, will also impact on the longer life.

This increase in life longevity and life expectancy has created periods of adjustment for the aged individual and the family. This paper will examine the problems associated with aging from the perspective of the aged individual, 65 years or older, and the family of the aged. In addition, the counselor's role in the process will be explored.

Problems of the Aged

There are basically two beliefs about aging: (1) it is a time of growth and reflection, and (2) it is a time of decline. As with all of life's behavior, an individual has a choice of how he or she lives the final years of the life. Society, however, seems to be an adversary of the elderly. In a capitalistic society individuals are valued by production. The elderly in America's society have been seen as a nonproductive unit. With retirement comes the period of nonproductivity, so old age has been characterized as a period of decline, not growth. It must be pointed out that attitudes are changing in the way the elderly are viewed and, because of financial necessity, attitudes may become much more positive.

Aging is associated mainly with physical changes such as graying of or loss of hair, wrinkles, slow gate, etc. But there are other forms of aging-- emotional, mental, and social--which are also observable and measurable. The unique thing about the aged is that different people age differently. Many persons handle one form of aging well but not another form. Counselors need to be very familiar with emotional and social aging. Just as with physical aging, emotional and social aging are hard to define. Physicians even disagree on what occurs in physical aging. One school of thought believes it happens because of the loss of body fluids and body heat. There is also the "wear and tear" theory. But no one knows exactly. With emotional and social aging, the same is true. Different clinicians believe these two forms of aging occur in different ways to different people.

It is best to view emotional or psychological aging in the context of a "life cycle." Aging then is only one part of a person's life cycle (Birren, 1974). A person passes through several life phases: infancy, childhood, adolescence, adulthood, middle age, and old age. Until recently very little has been done with the old age phase of the cycle. Dimmock (1981) divides this phase of the cycle into three areas: (1) go-go's, 65-75; (2) slow-go's, 75-85; and (3) no-go's, 85+. Again these vary from person to person but a clinician can predict behaviors of each of these groups. As a person's mobility declines, so does his or her psychological ability to handle aging. Older people should be advised to keep as mobile as possible. The more of a "go-go" or "slow-go" they can remain, the better the psychological phase of aging will be. Loosing

one's driver's license or ability to have freedom of mobility is an experience requiring great adjustment. Other arrangements for transportation must be made when a person can no longer drive in an automobile oriented society. Public transportation often makes the elderly the object of physical injury due to crime. At this point in a person's life, an individual who has never driven is better off than one who has driven because nondrivers have spent a lifetime of establishing a network of friends and rides and do not have to change their life pattern as those who are "go-go's."

An additional factor that contributes to poor psychological aging is loss. Dimmock (1981) cites five major losses an older person sustains. These losses amount to the five major crises in an older person's life. They are in order: (1) home, (2) health, (3) finance, (4) friends and loved ones, and (5) life. You may not agree with this rank order but listen to the logic behind it. Many elderly people become very materialistic as they age. These material goods, meager as they are, may be representative of security to them. The security in the home is one of memories. A person can lose a loved one but if they have a "home" full of memories, this will sustain them. If you have visited a widow or widower, they will take you on a "tour" of their possessions because these are necessary behaviors for them. This person can remain a "go-go" or a "slow-go" as long as they can return to the security of pleasant memories. When this situation is altered by physical necessity or "well-meaning" children, it can have irreversible consequences to the elderly person (Postalan, 1980). One belief is that a move for some elderly may kill them, especially when it is involuntary and after age 80. In order to prevent this a counselor needs to explore with the elderly person as well as with the family, alternative living arrangements while remaining in the home.

If you look at the other loss crises, they pertain to the loss of mobility. Usually, the loss of health, finances, and friends or loved ones restrict a person's mobility.

Problems of the Family

The American family has been going through a change since the coming of the industrial age. There have been many problems created by these changes, not the least of which has been the problems of the elderly members of the family.

In the early American agrarian family there was a sense of the extended family. Every member of the family, young and old, were needed to produce the essential goods of life and thus were viewed as productive members until their death. The female did the household tasks which she had done for her whole life. The male did the things he had done all his life--plowing the fields, reroofing the barn, and repairing equipment.

The coming of the industrial and electronic ages has changed the American family in many ways. The mobility of today's society has caused a loss of roots. America is now a throw-away society, working hard at not preserving what were at one time cherished material possessions (Toffler, 1971). The family has become what some sociologists call the fractured or nuclear family. This is different from the extended family of a century ago.

Society has for a number of years been in an adversary role with the elderly. Unions have been working to reduce the retirement age of older employees in order to make room for younger people. Industry has not opposed this for it is cheaper to employ a younger person than it is to pay the wages of a more experienced employee. No thought has been given to the loss of the experience. On the other hand, the family has continued to see the older member as remaining productive, and self-sufficient, giving no thought to what might happen if they became physically or mentally unable to remain productive. Also, at a time when the older individual needs stability, younger members are more mobile. The society's and the family's views create problems for the "aged."

In some cases social agencies have taken over the responsibilities for the needs of the elderly members of a family. Children in the hustle and bussel of life are often very willing to allow this to happen. But families in middle class America do not know where to go for help from the agencies because they frequently do not know what exists to help.

The problems that can face a family with elderly members are many. The problems discussed in this paper are but a few. The model proposed to handle these few is one that can be expanded as needed.

Family problems include the following:

Economics: Many elderly people today have been placed into an economic crisis due to inflation. The elderly are proud people who, all of their lives, have provided for themselves and do not want to be dependent upon another individual. The family needs to know what is available within the community for assistance. Service organizations available to help the elderly are:

Lyons Club, Exchange Club, Department of Social Services, and scouting groups. The family will have to contact these agencies because the elderly person may not do so. The other end of the economic continuum is the estate of an elderly person. He or she is frequently distrusting of the family when it comes to their economic estate. This feeling may be justified or it may not be. The family counselor needs to suggest the use of a lawyer in these matters. These economic situations can cause more family strife than poverty.

Housing: As stated previously, the loss of the home is sometimes one crisis from which an elderly person may never recover. The family must be aware of services available to prevent the loss as long as possible. In some communities, agencies provide home health services, and visitation to the elderly and shut-ins.

Health: The loss of health seems to affect almost all the problems faced by the elderly in the society. The family has many services for short-term illness provided by the community. Long-term health care poses different kinds of problems--visiting nurses, home delivery of medicines, and medical sitters, to name only a few. If the family can not provide these services, then they need to find out what community services are available.

Mobility: As stated earlier, as a person's mobility declines, so does his or her psychological aging. The family, if they can not provide mobility for the elderly member, needs to develop a network of transportation. This is best done with people the same age, as the older member of the family who is still mobile, especially when it comes to automobile transportation.

Parent Abuse: This problem is coming out of the closet. Much is known about child abuse, but little is known about elderly parent abuse. The family involved in this is definitely a potential client for counseling. The agencies who have handled child abuse are now doing more and more for parent abuse victims. There are also community agencies which deal with the rights of victims. The problem is, as with abused children, the elderly are not willing to come forth to counselors with the problems. They endure the abuse because of a need for security.

Counseling the Aging

As a counselor or a member of the helping profession, the question, "what can be done to help prevent or solve some of the problems facing the

elderly? must be answered. The problems of the elderly may come to the counselor through the younger members of the family. They may say things like my parent or parents are driving me up a wall, etc. By helping the elderly person the problems may be lessened. Elderly people will seldom seek counseling on their own, particularly if the counselor is younger than they are. They feel that they know more about being young than a young counselor knows about being old.

Should the counselor get to the point of an interview, certain things need to be kept in mind:

(1) The interview with an older person isn't any different than an interview with anyone else.

(2) Know ahead of time what the purpose of the interview is. Usually the first one is to get acquainted and to establish rapport and confidence.

(3) The second interview is to gather information about the individual. This helps establish two things: (a) what services they may need; and (b) if the family is involved, whether the family and the individual see the same needs. The family may say the elderly person can not live alone and the elderly person may say they can, etc.

(4) The interview can last from 10 to 60 minutes depending on the mood of the elderly person. Always remember not to rush the interview. A lonely person may use the length to determine rapport or confidence.

5. Early in the interviews one should be conducted with the elderly person and the family together. This will help establish the total picture.

(6) Depending on the "mobility" of the individual, the counselor may have to go to the residence of the elderly person.

As far as what should be discussed, any and all topics are valid. Skills in the area of aging are the same as the skills in any counseling situation. Some topics that generally come up are loneliness, finances, and ability to survive alone. Most elderly people see their children, regardless of their ages, as still children. The elderly are not too sure of their children's ability to make decisions in many areas.

One other effective method of working with the elderly is group counseling. The problem with this is transportation. Many of them will not be able to come to regular group sessions.

Surveying the community is a necessary thing for a counselor working with the elderly and their families. As needs arise, neither the elderly person

nor the family knows where to turn. It is a frightening time with a fear of the unknown and a fear of making a mistake.

Summary

The best way to deal with a problem is to be aware of it, anticipate it, and be ready for it. Like all things in life, a proactive mode is better than a reactive mode. Being human, most people prefer to be reactive and believe that none of the problems covered could possibly happen to them. The chances are excellent that if the elderly of a family are a couple, both will not die together; one will survive the other. Chances are good that some form of ill health or one of the other problems listed in this paper will befall an elderly person.

A family which has healthy, happy, mobile elderly members is a very fortunate family. Families need a game plan to follow should the situation instantly change, as it could. Counselors and others in the helping professions need to be aware of the problems faced by the elderly. Their role as family counselors demands this. Discussion on the matter needs to take place within the family, ignoring possibilities does not automatically mean they will not happen. Butler (1975) sums aging up this way, "The tragedy is not that each of us must grow old and die, but that the process of doing so has been made unnecessarily and, at times, excruciatingly painful, humiliating, and debilitating." America has shaped a society that is externally harsh to live in when one is old. For the most part, the elderly struggle to exist in a hostile environment. The counselor's role is to work with the aged and the family of the elderly to ease the pain which is part of the aging process.

References

- Butler, R. N. Why survive? Being old in america. New York: Harper and Row, 1975.
- Birren, J. E. Aging: psychological aspects. In Birren and Ruth Wey (Ed.).
Curriculum development in gerontology. Los Angeles: Ethel Peach Andrus
Gerontology Center, University of Southern California, 1981.
- Dimmonck, A. E. . The aged and their problems. Paper presented at Church Laymen's
Workshop, Spring 1981, Charleston, South Carolina.
- Harbert, A. and Ginsberg, L. H. Human services for older adults: concepts and
and skills. Belmont, California: Wadsworth, Inc, 1980.
- Hrobak, D. Age old solution. Charleston Evening Post/News and Courier,
January 18, 1981.
- Postalan, L. Elderly give up, die after being relocated. Charleston Evening Post,
May 18, 1980.
- Toffler, A. Future shock. New York: Bantam Books, 1971.